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OPINION

Lie tests, censors threaten freedom

President Reagan is fond of comparing the advantages of living in our country, where freedom rings, with the ordeal of life in the Soviet Union, where freedom weeps.

His analogy is valuable. We who live in an open society should count our blessings and sympathize with citizens of countries where free expression is feared, uninhibited political debate is never allowed and easy access to information, so vital to self-governance, is unknown.

It is more than mere rhetoric for the president to say our free speech tradition is precious and worth preserving.

That it is why it is impossible to understand his administration's push to enforce secrecy regulations that would chill free expression, curtail uninhibited political debate and curb citizen access to information.

The secrecy regulations allow the government to give random lie detector tests to federal employees who work with classified information — without any suspicion that they ever leaked anything.

Last week a Department of Justice official told Congress the administration thinks such lie detector tests — despite their frequent inaccuracy — are appropriate, even if there's no evidence employees have done anything wrong.

That sounds more like a policy practiced in Russia than in the United States. Whatever happened to the cherished ideal that all citizens, absent proof, are presumed innocent?

The secrecy rules also would forever bar 113,000 federal employees with security clearances from writing books or articles, or making speeches or comments on many public policy issues, without prior government approval.

That would put a government license on expression.

Sure, there have been government employees who have leaked embarrassing information about government. Leaks have angered many presidents, and some disclosures have been irresponsible. But in an open society, abuses occur.

And there are larger abuses by those who indiscriminately use the classified stamp to withhold from the public any document that reflects badly on government performance.

These secrecy rules thoughtlessly challenge the integrity of loyal government employees and put a lifetime muzzle on public servants who may wish to share knowledge and information their fellow citizens legitimately should have.

There are federal laws that make unauthorized release of classified information a criminal act, punishable by imprisonment and fine. When national security is affected, those laws should be vigorously enforced.

But this nation should never adopt the iron rules of totalitarian regimes, under the guise of protecting freedom. When citizens cannot speak or write without government license or permission, freedom is not protected. It is lost.